

Extract from minutes of –

DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

17th FEBRUARY, 2009

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**“Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce”**

The Committee was advised that representatives of the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce were in attendance and accordingly Messrs. J. Moore, D. Penick and N. Gordon were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman.

Mr. Moore advised the Members that the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce represented over 500 affiliated organisations and, in addition, it sought to support the interests of those businesses throughout the City who could not afford to be a member. He stated that the current financial crisis was having a severe effect on the businesses within the City centre and there was a real fear that many could stop trading and shop premises would remain vacant. He was therefore of the view that there was a need to ringfence and protect the City centre.

Mr. Penick stated that, it was not only the City centre which was affected by the economic downturn, but other trading locations throughout the City and surrounding cities and towns. He suggested that the problem would be exacerbated by the development of a large out-of-town retail unit at Sprucefield. He pointed out that his organisation would welcome the John Lewis company locating in either Belfast or Lisburn City centre, but they were opposed to the inappropriate out-of-town location.

Mr. Gordon suggested that a weak framework, in terms of the planning and development process, was having a detrimental effect on City centres and on smaller towns and villages throughout the province. The loss of local shops providing goods and services had an inappropriately detrimental affect on older people and people who could not afford to travel to large out-of-town shopping centres. He stated that there was a need to work together to encourage the development of the town/city centres throughout the province.

The deputation then answered a number of questions in relation to the development of out-of-town shopping centres and the likely effect this would have on the City centre and arterial routes throughout the City.

In relation to a question from a Member, the Principal Solicitor indicated that there was, at this point in time, no reason for the Council to seek a judicial review since no decision had been arrived at in regard to the planning application, and it appeared likely that the application would be subject to a local inquiry.

In conclusion, Mr. Moore advised the Committee that the majority of the John Lewis Group’s operations were located in city centres throughout the rest of the United Kingdom and that he was of the view that the opportunities offered by the developer at Sprucefield had been made very attractive to the John Lewis Group. He suggested that the Minister for the Environment should release Planning Policy Statement 5 with immediate effect. He pointed out that, since the development at Sprucefield would erode the rates base for the City, it would be appropriate for the Council to object to the development. Mr. Gordon stated that there was a need for investment on brownfield sites and not additional shopping centre constructed on out-of-town greenfield sites.

The members of the deputation thanked the Committee for receiving them and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee proceeded to consider the undernoted report in respect of the Council's position regarding the development at Sprucefield:

#### **'Relevant Background Information**

The Development Committee on the 10th December 2008 agreed to receive a presentation from the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce in respect of their concerns in relation to the current Sprucefield Centre Ltd application for further retail development at Sprucefield. The basis for the request and the details of the proposed development were set out in the report of 10th December 2008 which is included as Appendix 1 for information.

The adverse implications for the surrounding retail centres, arising from the proposed development, combined with the changed economic conditions highlights the necessity for a precautionary approach to both retail development and the application of policy. The advice contained in the previous report suggested that the Council, in recognition of the limited application modifications and changed economic climate, maintained the previously adopted positions both in respect of the objection to the application and the recommendation that the proposed development be subject to a Local inquiry.

The Committee resolved that in advance of the presentation and taking account of the changed economic situation it would not be appropriate, at that stage, for the Council to reiterate the previously adopted position in respect of the proposed application.

#### **Key Issues**

The modifications to the current planning application represent very minor changes from the previously submitted proposals that were the subject of objections from a number of organisations and the Council. The clearly identifiable adverse implications for the retail core of Belfast and the surrounding city and town centres therefore remain extant.

It should also be noted that the approval of the proposed application would have significant adverse implications for retail policy generally within the metropolitan area.

With regard to the retail policy Committee may wish to note that Planning Service in October 2008 requested the early release of that part of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) BMAP Report relating to strategic retail issues. The Commission recently confirmed that it took the view that this was a discrete issue and, as the public sessions of the inquiry were complete, it could comply with the Department's request. Whilst the Commission

recently confirmed that it had issued the report to the Department on 21st January 2009 both organisations have stated that the findings and recommendations contained within the report will not be made available to the public at this stage.

The Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Independent Belfast Retailers, along with a number of other objectors within the wider region, have indicated that they will be pursuing objections to the current Sprucefield Centre Ltd application. The Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce propose to make a presentation to the Committee in respect of the concerns arising from the proposed development and the potential impacts on the wider region over the short and longer term investment horizons.

The Chamber may also wish to take the opportunity to explore the potential for the development of similar working arrangements to those previously adopted whereby objectors shared a coordinated approach to the participation in any future public inquiry to reduce the potential cost of such an action.

Notwithstanding the above the Department it is suggested that the previous recommendation to the Committee remains the most appropriate course of action and the Council position, of objection to the proposed development and request for a Local Inquiry to be convened, be maintained.

#### **Resource Implications**

There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.

#### **Recommendations**

**Members are requested to:**

- maintain the previously adopted positions and approve the submission of an objection to the proposed development at Sprucefield including a recommendation that the proposed development be subject to a Local inquiry.'

After discussion, it was

Moved by Councillor McCarthy,  
Seconded by Councillor Lavery,

That the Committee agrees to maintain its previously adopted position and approves the submission of an objection to the proposed development at Sprucefield, including a recommendation that the proposed development be subject to a public inquiry.

On a vote by show of hands six Members voted for the proposal and one against and it was accordingly declared carried."

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